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**Do We Need a Fairy Godmother's Magic Stick to  
Communicate Our Humour to Other Cultures?  
Addressing the Barriers of Translating Jokes  
among Students of English**

هل نحتاج إلى عصا العرابة الجنية السحرية لإيصال حس الفكاهة إلى  
ثقافات أخرى؟ معالجة عوائق ترجمة النكت لدى طلبة اللغة الانجليزية

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**Abstract**

This article aims at shedding light on the linguistic side of humorous practices among students of English by means of exchanging jokes, a linguistic practice that can be hindered by means of various linguistic and cultural barriers. The failure of joking is a common experience that can be attributed to certain justified reasons which seem to be paradoxical when the case of Algerian master students of English is put under scrutiny. The sample of the study consists of 37 students of English (master degree). The findings of this study identify two main shortcomings as to the debated humorous activity. The conceptual shortcomings emanate from learners' inability to distinguish between the different types of humour. However, other shortcomings that may lead to a failure of achieving the humorous intent along telling jokes spring from learners' practices of translating jokes as they rely merely on their cultural national repertoires and their insufficient linguistic competency in English as a foreign language. Consequently, this study suggests the need for developing learners' awareness about the different types of humour and their tight link to

cultural frames. It also highlights the necessity of fomenting learners' intercultural competence in English language classes.

**Keywords:** Humour; Jokes; Translation; English language, Culture.

### المخلص:

يهدف هذا المقال إلى تسليط الضوء على الطابع اللغوي لحس الفكاهة لدى طلبة اللغة الانجليزية من خلال تبادل النكت، العملية اللغوية التي يمكن أن تواجه عدة عراقيل لغوية و ثقافية على حد سواء. إن فشل المزاح هو تجربة شائعة يمكن إرجاعها إلى بعض الأسباب المبررة و التي تبدو متناقضة ،وذلك يبدو جليا عند أخذ طلبة الماستر ( اللغة الإنجليزية) كعينة يمكن أن تعكس المسألة بوضوح. تتكون عينة الدراسة من 37 طالب اللغة الإنجليزية (درجة الماستر). يمكن حصر نتائج هذه الدراسة في محورين. المحور الاول يشير إلى عدم قدرة الطلبة على التمييز بين انواع الفكاهة المختلفة . أما فيما يخص المحور الثاني، فإن روح الدعابة، بالخصوص تبادل النكت بين الطلبة، هو معرض إلى الفشل و ذلك بسبب ممارسات ترجمة النكت التي يمكن إرجاعها إلى اعتماد الطلبة على رصيدهم الثقافي الوطني و نقص الكفاءة في اللغة الانجليزية. وبالتالي ، تقترح هذه الدراسة الحاجة إلى تنمية وعي المتعلمين بأنواع الفكاهة و صلتها الوثيقة بالعوامل الثقافية. كما يسלט الضوء على ضرورة إثراء الكفاءة الثقافية للمتعلمين من خلال دروس اللغة الإنجليزية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الفكاهة ; النكت ; الترجمة ; اللغة الإنجليزية ; الثقافة.

## 1 -Introduction

Language enables its users to communicate ideas, information and thoughts. However, this list is not exhaustive as it also allows more complex linguistic practices such as humour. The latter is necessary for establishing social rapports between individuals who exchange the different types of humour to tighten their social bonds. The significance of these humorous

activities extends to the English language classes as they enable learners to develop English language skills. Despite this luminous fact, the linguistic practices of humour may be obstructed by means of certain shortcomings that mainly relate to linguistic and cultural deficiencies among learners of English. This study combines both a theoretical and field work parts. The former deals with certain understandings of humour and jokes while the latter displays the methodology, including the participants and the research instruments.

## **2-Defining Humour**

Despite the omnipresence and ubiquity of the humorous practices that people all around the world routinely experience, sheer and superficial understandings are associated with the outlined, say, “funny process”. The frivolous descriptions of humour had been formulated on minimalist commonplace theoretical terrain, laughter. In other words, any interactive process that causes the individuals to laugh is deemed “humour” (Kerbrat-Orecchioni, 1981). Therefore, given the deluding nature of the concept humour, the coinage of an all-encompassing understanding for its heterogeneous features under a single system of reference would be a challenge, future researchers, need to be cognizant about (Attardo, 1994:121).

## **3-Significance of Humour**

Humour is believed to be advantages due to the coping strategies it affords for the individual. Under this line of thought, it generates adaptation panoramas when someone comes across unexpected situations, videlicet fear sadness and anger. In addition to the previously mentioned boons of humour, its therapeutic effects extend to account for stress reduction (Little, 2011:11). Moreover, humour tends to have macro effects along the outlined micro ones. In addition to the easiness that is established within funny milieus, social ties among the individuals are subsidized by such a desired exchange. In other

words, this playful interplay links both the teller and the hearer together in an attempt to unfold the joke's underlying meaning (Triezenberg, 2004:13). Most importantly, jokes are significant in making the individual feel a sense of belonging to a certain group, where ethnocentricity is substituted for ethnorelativity.

Humour, is believed to serve many functions that range from entertainment into morality concerns. Zabalbeascoa, P underscores four functions for humour: "*escapist entertainment, social criticism, pedagogical device, and moralizing intention*". In the same vein, jokes come to operate in the same way, perhaps with the emphasis on generating laughter among the audience. Howbeit, they are, in other cases, used to reflect one's personal attitudes videlicet approval or dislike.

Not only does humour display certain inner benefits for the individual, but it also generates other boons if it is well explored in the pedagogical milieu. In relation to that, the careful use of humorous passages along the instruction of particular subjects would induce pleasure along the process of learning. It is the case since it reinforces learners' skills of communicating and conducting successful dialogues. Muñiz emphasizes this idea as he comments:

...the comic thought, which with contradiction, and is strengthened by imagination, is capable of delivering pleasure by training and induces the pupil to participate in dialogue... Game and laughter are higher expressions of living and rejoicing of life (1996:83).

#### **4-Penetrating the Essence of Jokes**

Jokes are among the various genres of humour. These humorous practices are approached differently along divergent panoramas. Nevertheless, the cursory understandings of the concept joke seem to dominate the conceptual scene with regard to the understandings they trigger in both academic and casual ecologies. *Oxford Dictionary* , for instance, outlines the

following linguistic formula to the afore-cited process: “*A thing that someone says to cause amusement or laughter, especially a story with a funny punchline*”<sup>1</sup>. Under the same vein, the French dictionary “*Larousse*” nominates the ensuing description: “*Histoire plaisante imaginée pour amuser ou pour tromper*”<sup>2</sup> (Translated as “a pleasing imagined story to amuse or deceive”). Within the same line of thought, the Arabic Dictionary “*معجم* قال أشياء من”<sup>3</sup> “المعاني الجامع” (translated as “they said things that cause laughter and amusement”). A glance at the three provided understandings alludes to the perfunctory approaches to the meanings of joking. This is clear in the term “thing” used by both Oxford and Larousse dictionaries, which may trigger ambiguity more than definiteness. In addition to that, one can effortlessly identify the nucleus-outlined by the three dictionaries- as laughter and amusement. In such a case, the current discussion logically leads to the following query: “if both humour and jokes outline the perlocutionary effect- laughter, why are there two neologisms?”

## 5- Methodology

This paper aims at exploring two main panoramas in relation to humour, and joking in particular. The sample of the study consists of 37 Algerian students of English (master degree). A questionnaire that had been administered to the learners targeted two main objectives: the first one was to penetrate learners’ understandings of the process of joking, that is to say, it tests whether or not learners develop certain scientific and academic understandings of jokes. The second aim had been outlined in the translatability and untranslatability of jokes, the processes that generate diversified views in English language classes, and which, to some extent, affect the process of communicating humour to other cultures.

## 6- Results

This section provides the results of the conducted study. It embraces two main parts. The first one tackles learners' misunderstandings of the different types of Jokes. However, the second part identifies learners' translation deficiencies of jokes from and to English and Arabic.

### **6- a-Learners' Misunderstandings of Jokes**

Telling jokes, some of the surveyed learners believe, is a challenging practice since it calls upon divergent strategies innate and acquired in the teller. The challenge may be gelled to the targeted audience. Under this panorama, it might be suggested that the outlined humorous genre may be attired a cultural suit or an intercultural one. Jokes may be exchanged along common cultural milieus, among friends from the same region, between classmates in the same classroom, and even among individuals in the same country. The common culture serves as the common denominator that lubricates the whole process of telling jokes, since it unites both the teller and the listener (s) by affording the shared schema, contexts, perceptions, world knowledge, and most importantly, the sense of humour that is culturally sensitive. Logically, it follows from the above discussion that exchanging jokes within the same culture is a common practice that is done routinely and effortlessly.

Per contra, as more cultures intervene in the outlined humorous exchange, the challenge reaches its peak. Within this panorama, the linguistic and the extra-linguistic features of the foreign jokes predominate the scene. To begin with, the success of the foreign joke when told by a non-native speaker, hinges on the mastery of the language by both the teller and the listener. In case, one part lacks such linguistic capacity, a potential misunderstanding would occur, if not the failure of the joke. As to the extra-linguistic traits, it is well-established that a foreign joke brings to the humorous activity a different context that includes perceptions, views, expectations, traditions, norms, and

standards. The success of the joke resides in the awareness of these cultural variables. The surveyed learners had been asked if they were used to telling British jokes. As the data had been collected and analyzed, it was noticed that the great majority of them were not accustomed to telling jokes carried along the English language (84,21%). The minority of them claimed that exchange of British jokes among them (15,78%).

Under the same light of exchanging foreign jokes, the learners had been tested on their awareness about the differences that differentiate between Algerian jokes and the British ones. Positively, the majority of the learners lucidly pointed to the asymmetrical nature of both kinds of jokes (89,47%), while only few learners took the divergences at a surface level (10,52%). A learner commented :*“Both of them are funny. They make the audience laugh”*. The learners who pointed to the differences claimed that the British cultures and the Algerian ones were not alike, which makes that jokes within them differ. One learner argued: *“Since we are different in culture. We are different in telling a joke .Difference in culture, beliefs, norms”*. Another comment that foments the outlined belief goes as follows: *“There’s a difference because of culture. Sometimes when telling jokes in English even if the language is clear but we may not understand till we will be familiar with context.”*. Howbeit, the second category of learners pointed at the linguistic factors. Here is an exemplification by a learners’ view: *“Not familiar neither with the language nor with their society”*. The minority of learners emphasized the fact that the difference lies in the ways of telling jokes. They commented *“Because both of them have their own political and social contexts , besides each one has its own civilization. Moreover, the way of telling jokes is not the same”*.

Most of the interviewed learners claimed their likeliness for telling jokes (80%). Howbeit, this positive approach to the humorous activity had been eclipsed by various cursory and blackened misunderstandings in relation to the afore-mentioned

process. The data gathered from the second question of the questionnaire was categorized in three different tiers: Jokes as Stories, jokes as something, and jokes as “sayings”. Most of the learners assert that jokes can be used interchangeably with stories, both denoting the same humorous activity. One of the learners commented: *“It is the same think like story that make people laugh”*. Others framed jokes with the inclusive term “anything” that causes laughter. One of the views went this way *“Joke is something that makes you laugh”*. In the same line of thought, certain learners articulate that jokes might be described as “sayings”. A learner objected to the question and comments: *“It is a saying that creates funny atmosphere”*.

Do the interviewed learners recognize the anecdote and the joke as two distinguished genres of humour? The second question of the questionnaire aimed at exploring learners’ awareness of the divergent humorous practices. The analysis of the gathered data showed that most of them are au courant of the outlined stratifications. The interviewed learners agreed on the fact that the anecdote is a different form of humour. This is vivid in the following comment by a learner: *“Anecdote is somebody’s account of something it means a short personal account of an incident or event , it is a sort of entertaining story about the real incident or person”*. In the same vein, another learner adds that *“anecdote is not the same as joke . Anecdote is a short interesting story about real person or event”*. The minority of the learner seemed to perceive jokes and anecdote as being symmetrical genres.

Humour is an elusive concept that puzzles learners of English in Algeria. While most of the interviewed learners successfully outlined the demarcation line between jokes and anecdotes, most of them failed in identifying the constituents of the concept “pun”. Most of the learners left the question unanswered. A possible explanation for that is their inability to define the targeted humorous genre. This is luminous in their comments “



*no idea; don't know; no; It is man who makes jokes through gestures”.*

Both concepts of comedian and comic are of due significance in relation to the realm of humour. The distinction between the two categories was the aim behind the third sub-question (second question ) served to the interviewed learners. The data gathered had showcased that learners of English hold some misconceptions in relation to the afore-mentioned genres. Most of them stratified both concepts grammatically, comedian as a noun, and comic as an adjective. They commented: “ *Comedian is the person who tells jokes, but comic refers to something funny*”. Under the same spirit, another learner argued: *The comedian is the person whose job is to entertain people and make them laugh. A comic is something makes you laugh.* The second category of answers alluded to learners’ beliefs that comic and comedian may be used interchangeably. Students holding this view claimed: “*The comedian is the person who practices comedy ; also we can say comic actor.* Some other students pointed to the different qualities, they took to be authentic, which set the comedian and the comic lexically apart from one another. This is vivid in the argument that follows: “*Comedian is the person who performs actions in the auditorium, whereas the comic is the persons who is witty*”.

## **6-b- Learners’ Translation Practices of Algerian and British Jokes**

This part of the results sheds light on learners’ translation practices of both Algerian and English jokes. Most importantly, it scrutinizes the linguistic and cultural shortcomings that this afore-mentioned practice is obstructed by.

### **6-b-a Translating Algerian Jokes into English**

The interviewed learners had been given certain Algerian jokes and then asked to translate them. As the data had been collected and analyzed, it became lucid that some learners of

English develop some phobic attitudes towards the translatability of jokes. This category of learner believed that Algerian jokes should be told by Algerian people, or foreigners, but with Algerian languages or dialects. The reasons they elicited for such darkened view about the targeted translatability are outlined in the following comments: “*Never translate a joke copy it from the real context*”. A parallel idea is expressed in the ensuing comment “*No translation in jokes it won’t work*”. These attitudes, as a matter of fact, would narrow the intercultural dimensions of jokes.

The second category of learners did not believe in the translatability of jokes across cultures. Howbeit, their practices of translations had certain linguistic and cultural shortcomings. The first Algerian joke given to the learners was “قالك واحد حابس خلاصتلو القرعة تاع الغاز أيا عضها”, translated into English as “It is said that an idiot got his gas bottle empty, therefore he bit it”. Learners’ translation was featured by some language deficiencies. The most common linguistic shortcoming was noticed at the level of grammar. The main verbs in original joke were in the past tense. Howbeit, they were substituted for the present tense in the translated joke. Here is an exemplification “*Someone’s gas bottle got empty , so he bits it*. The same can be said about joke number four, where the simple past had been substituted for the past continuous. A learner argues: “*A group of persons where playing hide and seek, since 1962 they did not appear again*». The spelling mistakes, also, figured in their achievements, as it is the case for the following production “*when a gaz bottle of someone ended, he bited it*”. The linguistic intricacies were noticed at the level of leaving some parts of the translation undone. A learner has written “*Someone said the battle is finish so he...*” Other students were likely to modify the language of the original joke by using words like “*someone instead of an idiot*”. Brining learners’ attitudes about the translatability of jokes and their actual practices confirms their culture-centeredness. Therefore, some learners left some of the original words within the produced translation. The following

instance elucidates the point: “*a day someone his “ kar3a” becomes empty so he.....*”

No doubt, a translator who seeks a faithful and successful conveying of the original meaning would need a rich linguistic repertoire in both languages. Here, it is paramount to underscore the fact that some learners lacked some concepts in relation to the target language (English). This was vivid in their translation productions. The second joke was the following: “*قالك جماعة ..... “لعبوا لعبة الاختفاء من 1962 مازادوش ظهروا*” (translated as “*it is said that a group of individuals had played the hide-and-seek game since 1962; however, they did not reappear since then*”). Some learners failed to find equivalent words in the target language due to vocabulary shortcomings. A learner claimed “*Some people have played the hidden game since 1962 after that they did not appear*”. Under the same spirit, another learner comments “*A group played a hiding game, they never appeared again*”. In both translations, the hidden game and the hiding game do not match the English word “hide-and seek”.

The third joke given to the learners was intentionally loaded with specific cultural concepts within the Algerian culture. The joke goes as follows: “*واحد حب يشري سروال لوييا مالقاش شري سروال “عديس*” ( translated as “*Someone wanted to buy a harem pant ( Aladdin’s pant, in Algeria called the Bean’s Pant.), and since he did not find it in the shop, he bought lentil pant*). The analysis of the data collected from the process of translation revealed a serious problem as far the translation of the humorous act is concerned. In the same vein, a paradox had been identified. On the one hand, learners claim that jokes are cultural and context bound. However, their translation productions showed that most of them disregarded that essence and fell in the pool of literal translation. While some learners left the cultural key words untranslated, many learners substituted some cultural key concepts in the above mentioned joke, disregarding its unbecoming nature to faithfully communicating the meaning of the word within the source text. A student produced the

following literal translation of the joke: “*Someone wanted to buy a bean trousers when he did not find, he bought a lentil trousers*”. The surveyed learners seemed to ignore that literal translation is possible when a direct transfer of a source language text into a grammatically and idiomatically target text is appropriate and possible.

### 6-b-b Translating British Jokes into Algerian Dialects

In the second section of learners’ translation practices of jokes, they have been asked to translate British jokes into Algerian dialects. The first British joke was the ensuing: “*You know who really gives kids a bad name? Posh and Becks.*” Here, too, the nightmare of literal meaning comes to the debate. Learners use a verbatim way of communicating some words from the source language to the target one. A learner said “*على بالك شكون يسمي ولاده اسموات مشي ملاح بوش و باكس*” (Do you know who names his sons bad names “*Bush and Bax.*”

In analyzing their productions, it seemed clear that the first part where the language was understandable and familiar and did not hold particular cultural concepts, the learners successfully undertook the translation. However, as it came to the second part of the joke “where the cultural concepts “*Posh and Becks*” occurred, most of the learners failed in doing the required task. Some of them left the part without translation as in “*تعرف شكون ليعطي اسم سيئ للصغار....*” (translated as “do you know who gives bad names for kids”). Others mistranslated the second part as they pre-empted some Algerian cultural concepts which they thought would be suitable as an explanation for the joke. The idea becomes lucid along the following translation “*هل تعرف من يعطي الاسماء القبيحة كقدور و عيشوش*” (Translated as “Do you know who gives bad names like “*Kadour and Aichouch*”. The learner, here, related the giving of bad names to his culture, and hence added some Algerian old fashioned names to the joke. The same notice is identified in the following translation: “*تعرف*”

شكون الي يسمي اسموات كيوالو زعيط معيط (Translated as “Do you know who gives bad names: Zait Maait.”)

The second British joke also contained certain cultural concepts that needed an intercultural awareness. The joke goes as follows: “*What do you call a boomerang that doesn’t come back? – A stick*”. Most of the learners mistranslated the concept “boomerang” in their productions. While some of them left a space (to avoid the translation), as in “واش نقولو على الي ماترجعش (How do we call..... that does not come back”, others just wrote the word in Arabic, as in “ما تسما بومتغ لا تعود”. However, what is noticeable about the translation of this joke is that some learners took the joke for a proverb, which they identified as similar to some proverbs in their Algerian culture. One learner argued: “العَام الذي ذهب لا يعود” (translated as “The year that has gone never comes back”). Under the same vista, another learner produces the ensuing translation: “من لديه طبع لا يستطيع تغيره” (translated as “The one who has particular character cannot change it”). Furthermore, other shortcomings were observed in replacing the “stick” by different names (learners thought synonymous) such as “خشب” (trans as wood).

## 7- Discussion

Truly, the above discussions showcased that Algerian master students of English approach humour superficially. This is the case since most of their understandings tend to mingle between the different genres of humour. Moreover, the surveyed learners develop certain phobic and negative attitudes towards the translation of jokes. Not only this, but they tend to mistranslate certain culturally-specific jokes. These shortcomings would necessarily yield the following interrogations “would the joke remain funny given the attitudes learners have about the translatability of jokes? And do their practices of translations, including the linguistic and cultural shortcomings keep the essence of joking, laughing?”

Probably, learners' translation practices of jokes had been submitted to their negative attitudes, and hence their actual practices were characterized by certain linguistic and cultural deficiencies. As to the linguistic shortcomings, it may be suggested that jokes would have different meanings given the unsuccessful transfer of grammatical properties of the source joke. More importantly, the inappropriate cultural equivalents would not diverge the meaning, but they would lead to utterances part of nonsense!

## **8-Suggestions for an Effective Understanding of Jokes among Learners of English**

Given the significance of humour in developing learners' linguistic and inter-cultural competences, the duty of English language classes in supporting an effective understanding of these humorous practices is paramount. The below-mentioned suggestions are provided to scaffold the debated activity in EFL settings:

- Developing learners' linguistic competence ;
- identifying the tight rapport between language and culture;
- using authentic materials to teach about cultures;
- introducing informal English to English language classes;
- highlighting the different types of humour in English language classes;
- developing learners' knowledge about the different English dialects;
- fomenting learners' pragmatic competence;
- developing learners' intercultural competence.

## **9-Conclusion**

A successful translation of humour, Vandaele (2002) believes, calls upon a common understanding of humour. For such reason, he proposes the framework of humour in relation to

cognitive humorous effects. He carries on to suggest that these cognitive effects can forge the differences that the translator may come across, since they afford a space for diversified linguistic and non-linguistic systems of equivalence to contribute the same cognitive effect.

Another elemental feature that humour translation needs to abide by is contingency. Patrick Zabalbeascoa (2005:185) articulates that the targeted process should not submit to unbroken rules that decide upon the correctness and the falsehood of a given translation. On the contrary, the translator is more likely to violate some norms and employ certain tools that are created by them.

The translator's awareness of the intentionality of humour with regards to the source language/culture and target language /culture, can but enhance the debated process. It happens very often that some translation processes of humour are likely to unconsciously play with the humorous parts within a particular joke. That is to say, the translator misplaces the funny parts as he disrespects the order in relation to the source joke. Therefore, when dealing with more sensitive texts, translators should be cautious not to devoid the joke form its desired duty, laughter .

## **Endnotes**

1-The definition of the term “ jokes” had been retrieved from *Oxford Dictionary* accessed via <http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/joke>.

2-The definition of the term “Blague” had been retrieved from the dictionary “ *La Rousse*, accessed via <http://www.larousse.fr/dictionnaires/francais/blague/9715?q=blague#9608>.

3-The definition of the term “نكتة” had been retrieved from the Arabic dictionary *معجم المعاني الجامع* accessed via [http:// www.almaany.com/ar/dict/ar-ar/%D9%86%D9%83%D8%A%D8%A9/](http://www.almaany.com/ar/dict/ar-ar/%D9%86%D9%83%D8%A%D8%A9/).

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